

## Melancholy: the social construction of a disease

In this paper, I shall consider melancholy in Classical Greece. I shall start from Pseudo-Aristotle's *Problemata* (XXX) and Pseudo-Hippocrates' *Pseudoepigrapha* before looking at the role played by melancholy in Euripides' *Herakles* and the sources concerning Empedocles and Parmenides. I mean to demonstrate that fourth-century intellectuals endeavored to make sense of a disease, melancholy, that unavoidably lent itself to be misconceived and ill-contoured. In *Problemata*, in fact, Pseudo-Aristotle draws a line of demarcation between congenital and accidental melancholy. While the latter is engendered by a progressively greater consumption of wine (953 a-b), the former is caused by a rise in temperature and quantity of black bile happening close to the brain. Importantly, congenital melancholy affects especially those who are in contact with the gods, as Sybils and maenads. This passage is important in that it follows the famous opening of chapter XXX where Pseudo-Aristotle mentions, among those affected by melancholy, Herakles, Plato, Empedocles, and others who displayed an extraordinary nature (among whom, as I mean to demonstrate, Parmenides). The author, thus, implicitly establishes a connection between these figures and those, like Sybils and maenads, being supposed to be in contact with the gods.

Similar considerations can be made about Pseudo-Hippocrates' *Pseudoepigrapha*, a set of letters dated to the late first century B.C-first century A.D. but influenced by how melancholy was conceived in fourth century. In more detail, letters X-XVII address the insanity of Democritus, the fifth-century atomist, who is said to laugh at issues either of small or great relevance, to research and write about the netherworld, to eavesdrop on birds' songs and get up at night with the purpose of singing. Echoing Hippocr. *Epid.I.27*, Pseudo-Hippocrates treats these symptoms as signs of melancholy (XII). However, the author adds two important aspects: a) Democritus' pursuit of solitude is a mark of wisdom b) by

constantly laughing, Democritus challenges the gods, who are the only entities benefitting from unflinching happiness.

A reading of Pseudo-Aristotle and Pseudo-Hippocrates is essential to understand how, according to fourth-century intellectuals, congenital melancholy characterized people who stood out from others. Such a conclusion is strengthened by the fact that pseudo-Aristotle mentions, as examples of melancholic people, Empedocles (a wandering poet and philosopher who was credited with mastering natural phenomena and bringing the departed back to life), and Herakles (the hero who managed to enter the underworld and return from there).

Democritus, Empedocles, and Herakles share an extraordinary nature that makes them inhabit a non-human condition. Democritus wanders in search for wisdom, and “[w]andering is a mark of helplessness, and yet of superior power” (Montiglio 2005); in addition to his behaving “como un mendigo errante y desterrado”, Empedocles sees himself as a “dios-hombre que ya en vida goza de veneración religiosa” (Rodríguez Moreno 1995); by coming back from Hades unharmed, Herakles “seems to have transgressed the other metaphysical border, that between humanity and divinity” (Papadopoulou 2005).

Unlike fourth-century intellectuals, common people had a different attitude towards melancholy. In Pseudo-Hippocrates’ letters, in fact, the insanity of Democritus is said to pose danger to Democritus’ fellow citizens. Additionally, in fifth century, melancholy symptoms could be a means by which the gods punished mortals (as in Euripides’ *Herakles*).

More broadly, and this is the bulk of my paper, the very fact that melancholy presented no visible signs (ulcerations, wounds, and bleeding) and that affected a person’s behavior and mental health resulted in the multiple perspectives by which the Greeks engaged with it. On the one hand, in fact, Hippocratic doctors resorted to the idea of an “organic cause...affecting body’s chemistry” and causing “the patient to behave erratically” (Kazantzidis 2018); on the other hand, the philosophers like Pseudo-Aristotle saw in

congenital melancholy a consequence of possessing physical or intellectual qualities exceeding human limits.

#### Bibliography

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